

Learning Outcomes and Technology in the ESL Classroom

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Abstract

Multimedia and computer-assisted technologies are valuable tools which are increasingly being implemented into ESL classrooms world-wide. The use of such instructional tools can provide teachers with a more effective platform from which to bridge cultural differences while meeting the needs of a broad range of students. Analyzing students' needs, integrating technology, formulating assessments and evaluating instructional effectiveness remain critical factors in the implementation of clear and concise instructions. Notwithstanding, technology should not supplant students' needs or their learning outcomes as the primary focus in any instructional environment.

Reaching a diverse range of learners across cultural boundaries is one of the challenges facing the contemporary ESL learning environment. In response to the dynamic nature of ESL classrooms globally and the implementation of communication technologies in the classroom, the current direction of instructional design is moving away from pure esthetics and back towards purposeful functionality. A major concern for all stake-holders in reference to language instruction is the creation of a non-ambiguous and efficient operating environment for all students across a broad range of cultural backgrounds.

Design Principles

At a very basic level, good design principles should always be process driven. A step-by-step design process will ensure that a maximum of attention to critical factors are incorporated into the final product. A list of steps in the process of instructional design has been created by Dick, Carey & Carey (2003) entitled the Systems Approach Model, and they include;

“assess needs to identify goals, conduct instructional analysis, analyze learners and contexts, write performance objectives, develop assessment instruments, develop instructional strategy, develop and select instructional media, design and conduct the formative evaluation of instruction, revise instruction and design and conduct summative evaluation” (p.1-2).

This comprehensive design process is sensitive to cultural differences as it requires the investigation of the learning context and the instructional media, against an understanding of the learner’s attitudes, preferences, and skills. Simply creating an esthetically pleasing set of course instructions is not sufficient in providing an effective learning environment for a culturally diverse student body.

The strength of any design system is in its comprehensive step-by-step process in addressing all factors relating to the learning environment, the materials used, as well as the individual characteristics of the learners. This process should not however remain stiff or constrained. In reference to instructional design [Rothwell, Kazanas, Palloff, Pratt, Smith & Ragan, 2003] state, “it is intended to serve as a road map and not as an inflexible list of rules or required steps”(p.33). The use of an instructional design process will enable both institutions and individual teachers to better adapt to the rapid changes in communication technologies as well as the increase in cultural diversity within the global ESL environment.

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Goal Oriented Design

When designing instruction for any learning environment, the first step in the process should be a comprehensive needs assessment (Rothwell et al, 2003). In the case of the classroom environment, multimedia elements, graphics and text can subsequently be adopted and implemented according to the instructional needs of the target learners. Cultural aspects related to the needs assessment can be identified at this early stage and addressed accordingly.

The rapid development of communication technologies has left some designers focused solely on creating attractive and engaging multimedia elements. [Carliner, 2002] states, “somehow, the practice of design as appearance improving has replaced the concept of design as problem-solving, even though published definitions of document design suggest otherwise” (p.1). It would appear that the unique design challenges of language instruction have shifted some in the academic world to focus away from the goal of meeting an instructional need towards simply creating an entertaining learning experience for students. Language learning should provide students with a comfortable and pleasing environment; however it should be grounded in a process through which an instructional need can be answered.

Analyzing Learners and Their Context

Adopting multimedia or instructional materials should not prefigure an analysis of who the learners are and what the learning context will be. Attempting to minimize cultural misunderstanding within the learning environment will require a comprehensive learner analysis. This should include their age, gender, socio-economic backgrounds, religion, attitudes, current skills and abilities as well as their learning preferences (Dick, et al, 2003, p.1). A cultural analysis can be imposed onto this process through the use of a cultural theory such as Prof. Geert Hofstede’s (2003) Cultural Dimensions.

Art, imagery and design are all culturally produced. Before multimedia elements are implemented that will impact students in the online learning experience, cultural implications should be addressed. [Thrower-Tim, 1999] suggests issues related to culture and multimedia that should be addressed include;

prior experience with computers, cognitive learning style, linguistic considerations, the cultural transference of the visual images or icons, culturally sensitive or insensitive sound signals, ambiguous tasks, and culturally biased tasks or problems that do not allow for the diverse cultural referents that students bring to the learning situation (p.1-2).

People from different cultures approach, interpret, interact and learn from visual elements differently. It is only after the affects of multimedia are analyzed in reference to the cultural composition of the entire range of possible learners that effective instruction can be designed.

Designing for a Global Classroom

Technological advancements and the pervasiveness of the Internet, including access to the World Wide Web, have dramatically increased the number of institutions offering technologically assisted courses. The question now remains as to whether or not institutions and teachers can meet the demands of this emerging and culturally diverse environment. Design as a component of fine-art has developed world-wide from a cultural sense of aesthetics. How individuals from different cultures approach visual design elements must be factored into the design of any technologically assisted language courses for global applications.

Is design keeping pace with the ESL classroom globally? Current design practices seem to be focusing on appearance improving processes rather than problem-solving. Carliner (2002) suggest that, “designers are focused less on effective communication

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applications within classroom instruction, and more on issues related to aesthetics of screen appearances” (p.1). Creating courses for a global educational environment requires a comprehensive design process that will integrate multimedia elements while remaining sensitive to cultural differences.

The rapid propagation of technologically assisted instruction has designers transferring their skills from a traditional classroom focus to a multimedia instructional environment. With this design realignment comes a transformation in the definition of design. [Carliner, 2002] suggests that design should be considered, “an interdisciplinary approach which combines skills in graphic design, writing and editing, illustration, and human factors (p.2). Developing effective instruction for an ESL classroom comprised of a culturally diverse spectrum of students will compel designers to reevaluate their creative directions.

Increasingly academic institutions are integrating communication technologies into their traditional ESL learning environments. It will remain incumbent upon both institutions and individual teachers to remain sensitive to the needs of all students, inclusive of their cultural differences. Moreover, all stakeholders connected to designing instructions for ESL classrooms should not succumb to the seductiveness of multimedia technologies as their primary focus. Quality instructional designs should always hold learning outcomes as their fundamental goals. Technology as such should be used as just one more tool through which teachers can reach their students’ learning objectives.

Expectations of Technology in the ESL Classroom

The global demand of ESL instructional designs has both institutions and teachers focusing on problem-solving as well as esthetics in meeting the learning objectives of students. Implementing multimedia, while remaining sensitive to cultural differences, should be addressed through the utilization of a comprehensive design process. The

challenge remains to integrate the dynamic ability of computer learning with a culturally sensitive and non-ambiguous learning environment.

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